

Teacher Guide
Primary Source Set: Thanksgiving



The First Thanksgiving 1621 (c1932)

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq\(@field\(NUMBER+@band\(cph+3a17442\)\)+@field\(COLLID+cph\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?pp/ils:@filreq(@field(NUMBER+@band(cph+3a17442))+@field(COLLID+cph)))

Throughout history, people have given thanks – sometimes in joyful celebration, often in solemn, even prayerful, ceremony. The United States, over hundreds of years, has come to observe a national holiday for giving thanks. Thanksgiving: family and friends, crisp fall weather, orange and gold leaves, football, turkey, pumpkin pie ...

Early Thanksgiving Celebrations —

In 1541, Spanish explorer Francisco Vazquez de Coronado led 1,500 men in a thanksgiving celebration in what is today the Texas Panhandle. Two decades later, French Huguenot colonists gave solemn praise and thanksgiving at a settlement near what is now Jacksonville, Florida. English settlers joined Abnaki Indians along Maine's Kennebec River for a harvest feast and prayer meeting in August 1607. In the spring of 1610, in what many consider the "first American Thanksgiving," colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, held a thanksgiving prayer service after English supply ships arrived with much-needed food. Eleven years later, Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony celebrated the autumn harvest with a three-day feast. Governor William Bradford invited the chief of the Wampanoag tribe, Massasoit, and his tribesmen to join the colonists and feast on wild turkeys, duck, geese, venison, lobsters, clams, bass, corn, green vegetables, and dried fruits. The celebration included athletic contests and a military review. That harvest celebration is given the distinction of shaping many of America's Thanksgiving traditions.

Thanksgiving in the New Nation —

In November 1775, *the Boston Gazette and Country Journal* published a proclamation for a public thanksgiving, asking citizens "...to offer up humble and fervent Prayers to Almighty GOD, for the whole British Empire; especially for the UNITED AMERICAN COLONIES ..." Two years later, the Continental Congress recommended that the colonies observe a day of thanksgiving after the colonists' October victory over British forces in the Battle of Saratoga. The commander-in-chief of the Continental forces, George Washington, set aside Thursday, December 18 "for Solemn Thanksgiving and Praise."

Two years later, as the president of the United States, George Washington proclaimed November 26 a day of national thanksgiving and prayer, but Thanksgiving failed to become an annual tradition at this time. Only Presidents Washington, Adams, and Madison declared national days of thanks. Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams considered the practice to infringe upon the separation of church and state.

Thanksgiving Traditions —

On December 26, 1850, the Territory of Minnesota observed its first Thanksgiving Day with a spirited celebration. Territory Governor Alexander Ramsey stated, “. . . Let us in the public temple of religion, by the fireside and family altar, on the prairie and in the forest, join in the expression of our gratitude, of our devotion to the God who brought our fathers safely through the perils of an early revolution, and who thus continues his favors to the remotest colonies of his sons.” Such sentiments were echoed throughout states and territories of the U.S., and thanksgiving became an unofficial national tradition even before it became a national holiday.

Another tradition was begun when the American Intercollegiate Football Association held its first championship game on Thanksgiving Day, 1876. By the 1890s, perennial favorites Yale and Princeton drew huge crowds of fans for the collegiate championship games, and thousands more club, college, and high school football games were played on the holiday. In 1934, 26,000 fans watched the Detroit Lions face the Chicago Bears at the University of Detroit Stadium in the first National Football League game held on Thanksgiving Day. Ninety-four stations on the NBC radio network broadcast that game, and televised broadcasts of games began in 1956.

When employees, friends, and families of Macy's sponsored the department store's first annual Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York City in 1924, another tradition was born. The Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade soon became the standard event that heralded the official start of the Christmas shopping season.

On Thanksgiving Eve 1947, President Harry Truman "pardoned" a turkey the day before it was scheduled to be a main attraction at the White House Thanksgiving dinner. The pardoning of one lucky bird, along with the commutation of a trip to the chopping block into a lifelong stay in a Herndon, Virginia, petting zoo, is now an annual Thanksgiving event at the White House.

Establishing a National Thanksgiving Holiday —

In 1939, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared November 23, the next-to-last Thursday of the month, to be Thanksgiving Day. However, the proclamation applied only the District of Columbia and to federal employees. While governors usually followed the president's lead with state proclamations for the same day, in that year 23 states observed Thanksgiving Day on November 23; 23 states celebrated on November 30, and Texas and Colorado declared both Thursdays to be holidays. Football coaches scrambled to reschedule games set for November 30, and people weren't sure when to start their Christmas shopping! After two years of confusion and complaint, President Roosevelt signed legislation establishing Thanksgiving Day as the fourth Thursday in November.

Thanksgiving Events in Current History and Today —

On Thanksgiving Day 1963, six days after the assassination of President Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation. He announced that Florida's NASA Launch Operation Center would be renamed the John F. Kennedy Space Center and he asked the public to remain "determined that from this midnight of tragedy we shall move toward a new American greatness."

The civil rights efforts of the 1960s translated into a heightened political and social presence for Native Americans in the 1970s. Organizations such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) staged political protests to draw attention to unjust treatment of Native Americans. On Thanksgiving Day 1970, 25 Native Americans dressed in traditional garb held a day of mourning at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Gathered before the statue of Massasoit, the Wampanoag chief who aided the Plymouth Colony, they buried Plymouth Rock under mounds of sand.

As the nation celebrated Thanksgiving Day 2000, it remained unclear who would pardon the White House turkey the following year. The closest presidential election in U.S. history became the longest election in U.S. history as candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush wrangled over voting results for weeks. Bush was finally declared the winner after a December 12 Supreme Court ruling that hand-counting disputed votes in Florida was unconstitutional.

The events of September 11, 2001, resulted in the tragic loss of life and led to the deployment of U.S. troops overseas. As Americans have celebrated Thanksgiving in the early years of the 21st century, many have done so with a heightened awareness of all that they have to be thankful for and of the potential risks that their families and others face, both in this country and abroad.

Suggestions for teachers:

Teachers may use these Library of Congress primary source documents to introduce historical perspectives on the American Thanksgiving tradition. Multiple versions of the signing of the Mayflower Compact allow students to consider artists' differing points of view. Images of the landing at Plymouth in 1620, meetings with the Native people and the first Thanksgiving are included to help students consider the artistic vision in contrast to the reality of the actual events. Students can read and analyze official proclamations for a day of thanks from 1678, 1721, 1789, and 1863, as well as the famous letter from Sarah Hale to Abraham Lincoln requesting an official National Thanksgiving Day.

Thanksgiving drawings and photographs from the Civil War era, 1911, 1921, and 1942 present views of this American tradition during different eras. Students can compare historical Thanksgiving celebrations with the ways families, schoolchildren and communities observe Thanksgiving today.

Online resources:

Library of Congress Links —

[Thanksgiving in American Memory](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/thanks/thanks.html) a feature presentation from the Learning Page
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/thanks/thanks.html>

[Thanksgiving Timeline](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/thanksgiving/timeline/1630.html) a timeline of the history of Thanksgiving in the Americas
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/thanksgiving/timeline/1630.html>

[Today in History: November 25](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/nov25.html) a sampler of historical information about the U.S. Thanksgiving celebration
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/nov25.html>

Links Outside the Library of Congress —

[Mayflower Compact](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerdoc/mayflower.htm) includes the text of this document and the names of those who signed it
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerdoc/mayflower.htm>

[The History of Thanksgiving](http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/thanksgiving/) from History Channel
<http://www.historychannel.com/exhibits/thanksgiving/>

[Thanksgiving – Living, Breathing History](http://www.plimoth.org/learn/history/thanksgiving/thanksgiving.asp) from Plimoth Plantation
<http://www.plimoth.org/learn/history/thanksgiving/thanksgiving.asp>